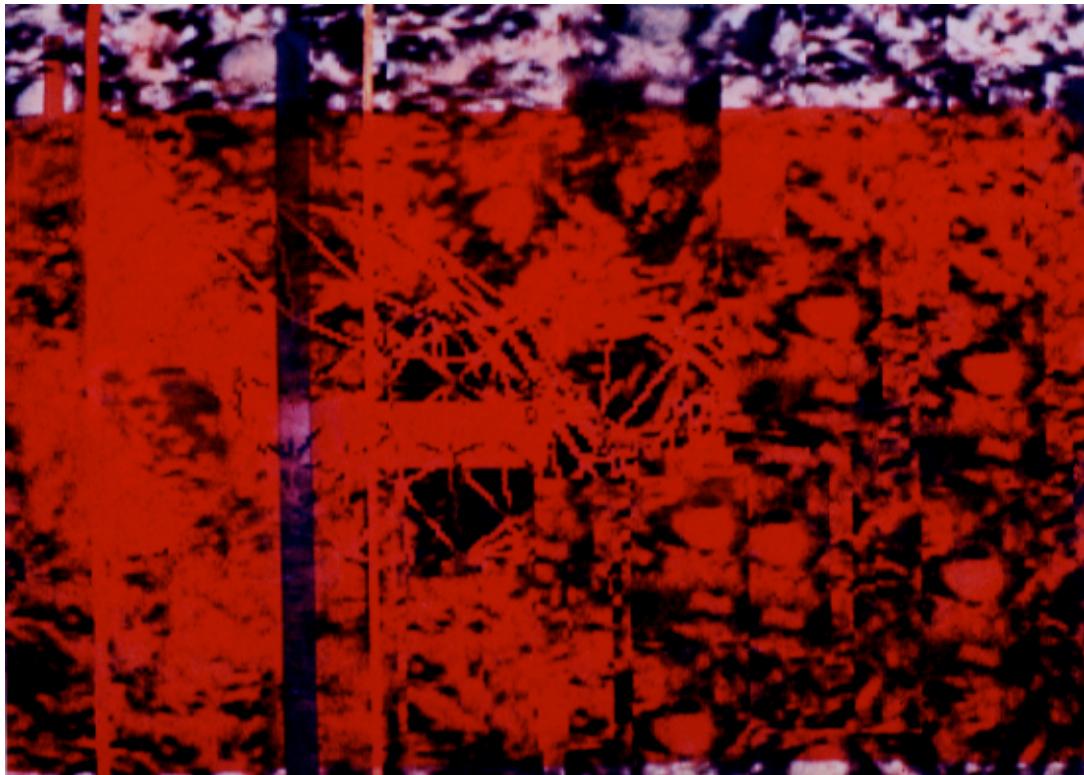


Joseph Nechvatal: Laminations of the Soul

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Joseph Nechvatal, *The Remains* (1991) 90x140" computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas

The computer-robotic assisted paintings of Joseph Nechvatal offer a mirage, a kind of decoy that robs us of any persuasive stability. They are difficult paintings to guard against; they are elusive and yet seductive images. They are techno-images, piled upon one another; the result is an achievement by way of a lamination process. The seduction of these webbed-fields, these networks of striated ground on which figures may or may not reside, is given over to an erotic vision; a sensuousness of mind. This seduction, however, does not leave us in the same cultural gap that most advertising

does; rather, it leaves us burrowing deeper into the network of signs that Nechvatal has prepared for us. The seduction is real. There is nothing illusory about it. The webbed surfaces result from a process which could appear infinite. In this sense, Nechvatal's computer-robotic assisted paintings bring us to a chasm of doubt - one where we lean forward in anticipation, and then lean back as our gaze relaxes. Our focus may begin to dissipate; yet there is the desire to cling to something in the field, some recognition, some substance whereby the passage of light through layering of imagery and the doubling of signs into free-floating signifiers of another generation open up new levels of resemblance. With Nechvatal, the layering is the lamination of the soul; the inward investment turned outward toward the gaze. It is on the crest of the gaze that we pass through into another territory, an oblique region where striations of meaning evoke mystery as opposed to resolution. This is the crux of the struggle: "In my computer-robotic assisted paintings, the struggling soul is caught in an inexorable web of proliferation and abused spiritual vision (...). Their look breaks down the given signs of our time in order to liquidate their meanings. Mental associations are liberated from the constraints imposed upon us by mass cultural patterns. Emotions and thoughts once repressed can be freed by the shaking of these codes." -Joseph Nechvatal, *Lecture* (February 28, 1989) given at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California

What does the artist mean when he refers to the shaking of the codes? It would seem that there is a peculiar tension in the air, a tension between ordering and disordering, a tension between the desire for resolution and the occasion to hover - to equate meaning not with resolution, but to forge meaning out of quantum mechanics: the both/and in contrast to the existentialist's either/or. The nature of this struggle is profound in that it is both inwardly and outwardly manifested in all reaches of psychological, social, political, economic, and technological behavior. It has seeped

into the domain of the religious - not the governing institutions, but within that of the quest for ecstatic or ascetic spiritual life. This overabundance of tension, of forces within nature and culture, has produced another level of mass culture often referred to by Nechvatal as the 'hyper-real'. It is here within the bowels of the hyper-real that the code is shaken. The hyper-real is the storehouse of codes. Here within the hyper-real there is no dimensionality. There is no cut within space. There is only the single-layered topology with the illusions of layering, the deceit, the death-like mask of an arcane secrecy, the hermeticist's code, the involuted cycle of repetitions and reshuffling. It is within the hyper-real that Nechvatal locates his signs. All resemblance emanate from it. It is the seat of a soul in question. It is the quest for certainty even where certainty cannot be known. It is within the domain of the hyper-real that the forces of nature and culture are dissolved, then reconstituted. It is *fort! da!* all over again. It is an accumulation of cultural and hence psychoanalytic bricolage.

There is a kind of skirmish going on in Nechvatal's robotic residue of pigment. There are two edges of a theoretical construct in view. The "control" aspect is expressed by Paul Virilio: "With the coming of democratic power, we see a perversion of primitive transmigration: the soul, by becoming individual, has become Reason, in other words the seat of a prescriptive rule of our actions, our movements, even the totality of our destinies." -Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 1977, Semiotext(e), page 87

In contrast, Deleuze and Guatteri admonish us that Reason has become too over-determined: "The error we must guard against is to believe that there is a kind of logical order to this string, these crossings or transformations. It is already going too far to postulate an order descending from animal to the vegetable, then to molecules, to particles. Each multiplicity is symbiotic; it's becoming ties together animals, plants, microorganisms, mad particles, a whole galaxy." -Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guatteri, *A*

Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, 1987, University of Minnesota Press,
page 250

Nechvatal appears in search of some form of unmediated experience, yet knowing full well that such a task is futile in a culture of instant mediation. Baudrillard's vision of the hyper-real occurs as an inflated sign system. The reverberation of signs - the similitudes - echo back and forth within locked chambers. There is no escape from mediation in such a system. Yet there is some of Kierkegaard's doubt that remains residual in the computer-robotic assisted paintings of Nechvatal, some quest for certainty against all odds that any form of certainty can be known. Nechvatal, as with the anti-Oedipal theories of Deleuze and Guattari, defies the premise of a necessary repetition. In his painting *Crypt* there is an obfuscation of the figures, a battleground between the forces of Eros and Thanatos. Similarly, in *Destruction of the Regime* (the phallogocentric regime?) there is a contest between light and shadow, between two standing figures poised in a web of signs. *Scatological Man* recalls the Hollywood version of a werewolf, another kind of transformation where a soul is lost, ululating, mistaken in his own identity. One may recall the struggle of Artaud in this regard. Artaud's struggle for certainty could only be equated with an unmediated experience; an experience free from the fetters imposed by language, as if he could in some dumb way escape his knowledge of language and deliberately deprive himself of westernized culture, the gilt (guilt) and the glitz: "Where from the bottom of a nameless synthesis this writhing, snorting soul might feel the possibility as in dreams of waking up in a more lucid world after having perforated it knows not what barrier - and finds itself in a luminosity where at last its limbs relax, in a place where all worldly partitions seem infinitely fragile." -Antonin Artaud, *Anthology*, 1965, City Lights, pp. 51-52

The source of Artaud's agony was the impossibility of his struggle. Unlike the legend of Sisyphus, Artaud's knowledge of the act of his repetition was self-imposed, and it was the disdain of this self-imposed task to escape the conditions of language that would not relinquish itself. This syndrome between liberation and disdain is difficult to reconcile. For Derrida it became apparent that "Artaud's entire adventure is purportedly only the index of a transcendental structure (...)." -Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 1978, University of Chicago Press, page 171

That is, Artaud functioned as a kind of cipher for language where the essence of thought divorced itself from life; where the theater of spectacle stood apart from, yet reflective of, the drama of life.

It seems to me that a similar doubling effect occurs within the frame of a Nechvatal computer-robotic assisted painting as one may acknowledge the surface as razor thin, yet the lamination process somehow vanquishes all traces of a depth reading. With Nechvatal we are left with a surface, a computerized discourse. All the information has been computer-robotically painted according to specification. We read through the skeins the traces of signs. The process appears completely distanced from its source. All memory is forgotten - at least temporarily. We are asked to concentrate upon the computer-robotic image as a whole. The figure to ground relationship is diminished by the flatness. There is a build-up of repression. It seethes from the fabric and seeps out into the porous membrane from which the image barely escapes.

If we are to believe Nechvatal that "beneath the established signs (...) another, deeper discourse which recalls a time of universal resemblance exists" then we must accept that he has positioned himself in relation to this discourse. -Joseph Nechvatal, *Lecture* (February 28, 1989) given at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California

But how?

Has technology somehow liberated Nechvatal from the self-imposition of his repetition? Has he relinquished himself from the modernist burden of time, the cause-and-effect relationship where freedom and disdain necessarily merge in the form of some new tyranny of trepidation? Is it Nechvatal's projection of this tyranny of signs that is being replaced by yet another form of overload resulting in the dissolution of the social?

As with Virilio the factor of speed has changed the notion of the historical sign forever. We have arrived or are in the process of arriving at another platitude in which the illusion of stasis binds us in terror and loss of memory. In the place of memory, we have nostalgia creeping in; a false romanticism clinging to the pathetic vestiges of another era. The romantic Other still reigns in opposition to technological advance. And it is precisely at this juncture where Nechvatal takes issue: "The great problem of today is to attain a balance and wholeness in our civilization so we can command the machine we have created instead of becoming its helpless accomplice and passive victim. We must leave room for an answering response of an indeterminable kind in order to allow for participation in the creative act. We must avoid a world in which whatever seems obscure and inward, whatever cannot be reduced to a quantity, is thereby treated as unreal. A world that is impersonal." - Joseph Nechvatal, *Lecture* (February 28, 1989) given at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California

In contrast to the agonizing doubling of Artaud, Nechvatal is unwilling to relinquish himself in relation to the field of signs. Though he incorporates nude bodies as part of

his spectacle, the graffiti on the body functions more within the realm of the romantic symbol, the decadent *fin de siecle* phenomenon of spiritual transformation; yet we never lose sight of the spectacle. We never enter into that theater. We are kept at a distance. More like Brecht, we are exposed to a form of defamiliarization. The body as text is lost in the field - a field that keeps disappearing through all its density. The ecstasy of this mode of electronic light is caught in a weirdly constructed vapor. We are forever in the process of its delay, forever exploring the means of its construction and simultaneous deconstruction. There is the very real factor of alienation through our awareness of time. The gaze is replaced by a scan and the scan pulsates in and out, refocusing itself at intervals, searching for a tactile interlude, a place for the eye to hold an identifiable mark.

Other works such as *Ontic Aid* and *Deposit* further exceed the limits of the topological field by way of positing strange diagrams built through a sequence of pixilation on the computerized raster. These diagrams could operate as further indexes - clues of another schema, a possible metalanguage infused within the shrouded plethora of simulacra. With *Ontic Aid* we never forsake the totality of the screen. The red and blue zips - appropriated from Newman - hold our gaze in a mode of delay as memory invokes its automatic scanning process much in the way that Michaux detoured from his hieroglyphic consciousness into the unconscious vibrations of another mind network. The electronic circuitry between mind and machine opens up another dimension of language: Nietzschean yea-saying to the diminishing of the sign. The subduing of the cathectic detail is persistently interrupted. We hear the crackling charges on the wires of another synaptical order. The mind and the machine have left the sadomasochism endemic to the industrial age.

Nechvatal's art confronts Marinetti's free-floating signifiers without fear. The interludes are vital, yet the field is enormous and fraught with density. The constellations suddenly begin to appear, to harmonize, to strike new chords of equivalence. The dogged frame is removed from the premises. The vapor is ordered within the mind/machine only to evoke a disordering or retrieval. The power has been decentralized, taken from the realm of the monogram, the emblem, and laminated against the field. The depth is unknown, but the emotions are real. The soul manifests its knowledge through its pulse, forever on the brink of language.